

Book Review

The Perfection Trap – The Power of Good Enough in a World that Always Wants More

By Thomas Curran, Cornerstone Press, 2023, 289 pp., INR 799 (paperback), ISBN 978-1847943859.

Aishwarya Bellam

Ph.D. Research Scholar, London School of Economics (LSE), UK
a.bellam@lse.ac.uk

The Perfection Trap: your guide to choosing a happy life over the perfect life

Thomas Curran's *The Perfection Trap* takes you through a thought-provoking and poignant journey to self-discovery. In the book, Curran explores how perfectionism has so rampantly and yet inconspicuously permeated into our lifestyles as a result of the ruthlessly competitive and growth-driven culture that we live in. Research-based and data-driven, the book lays out the theoretical foundation and conceptual framework of perfectionism while interweaving the science with compelling personal anecdotes and vivid storytelling. Curran challenges the common notion that perfectionism is the key to success and instead highlights how it has become a malaise that has reached the levels of a dangerous mental health epidemic. He outlines how the very core of perfectionism is based in self-doubt and harsh self-criticism in response to the flaws and weaknesses that make us human. Perfectionism, he asserts, masquerades as a desirable human quality while it slowly eats away at our happiness and health and becomes the very cause of our misery and distress.

What's scintillating and provocative is Curran's deftness and expertise in teasing out the reasons why the insidious effects of perfectionism are not a personal affliction but are a malady that plague society at large. He writes, "...perfectionism is – and can only ever be – a relational trait; a self-esteem issue, arising not in a vacuum within individuals, but in our social world..." (p. 25). He goes on to

identify, describe and examine the role of culturally-embedded psychological, social, political and economic factors in his phenomenal analysis of the sources that are driving the rise of perfectionism levels in society. Curran dares to do what most authors would not as he refuses to place the blame for the causes and consequences of perfectionism on the people who suffer from it and instead explicitly implicates the role of a capitalistic culture in the widespread rise of perfectionism. This is the core theme of the book – the idea that striving for perfection is a trap set up by a self-serving society that thrives on mindless growth while it tricks its citizens into thinking that the only way to survive is to achieve perfection. And it all comes at the cost of the health and well-being of its citizens.

True to his identity as an academic who also happens to be a perfectionist, Curran does what any other perfectionist would expect him to do with the structure, organisation and flow of the book. He offers a rigorous and crystal-clear account of the theory of perfectionism across the 13 chapters of his book. And to do so, he relies upon the knowledge he gained from his conversations with experienced scholars in the area – Paul Hewitt and Gordon Flett. Not just this, he also draws upon the wisdom in the writings of Karen Horney and Judith Harris to provide the context for his ideas on how and why our culture is the primary culprit that is responsible for the unchecked rise of perfectionism. And he cleverly lets the theoretical knowledge ride on the back of several robust findings from the research literature to really drive his point about how perfectionism has tightly gripped our lifestyles. And if all this were not already enough to convince the reader of the ways in which perfectionism is wreaking havoc in our lives, he infuses his analyses with candid, honest and vulnerable narratives of many of his own life experiences.

The powerful combination of theory, data and storytelling sparks curiosity and introspection in the reader. Just as you come to appreciate that perfectionism does affect every last one of us, Curran decides to take you on a tour to show you just how much of our lives are dictated by perfectionistic pressures. He starts with exploring the context of the culture that breeds perfectionism, stops next to delve into the world that is perfection personified – social media, moves on to putting into perspective the quest for perfect credentials in an education system that

glorifies merit, progresses to the effects of altered parenting styles in response to a growth-driven economy, and finally surveys the hustle culture that has become commonplace in our work environments as a result of intense competition. But Curran knows well to not leave his readers feeling dejected from the gloomy picture that the research presents on how perfectionism is playing out in our everyday lives. Instead of yielding to a deterministic narrative, he concludes with an impassioned call to action. And the answer lies in self-acceptance. The message is as loud and clear as it is heartening. We ail from the perfectionism malady collectively as a society and the only way to heal is to accept ourselves and each other, complete with our flaws and imperfections, allowing the space for our weaknesses and failures to exist and sit comfortably beside our strengths and successes. He offers several actionable ways through which this idea of acceptance can be actualised. It is an impressively powerful conclusion to an equally compelling narrative presented throughout the book.

A remarkable contribution to the perfectionism literature, the book is packed with inspiring insights informed by critical analyses and internal struggles of the author. While the book paints a grim picture of the harsh realities of perfectionism and its deleterious impact on our lives, Curran's effortless flair for writing and amusing wit make for a reflective read. There are many lessons to be discovered throughout this riveting book. If you're a perfectionist who's always chasing unattainably high standards or if you know someone who is a perfectionist, this book is a must-read. It will help you feel seen and validated in ways you've never felt before, it will offer you the much-needed solace you're searching for, and it will teach you how to find and embrace the power in being "good enough". The Perfection Trap is well-worth your time; read it, pass it on, gift it. The powerful message of this book needs to travel far and wide because there's a whole world of people out here who need to overcome the drive to be perfect in order to invest in their own happiness, health and success for a more meaningful and fulfilling life. This book will help you and them do so.

